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ABSTRACT

This booklet, part of a series of reports on "hot topics" in education review the research and conventional wisdom concerning retention and promotion and includes an exploration of alternative practices that can be used to prevent failure and improve a student's chances for successful remediation. The booklet also describes how two schools in the northwestern United States are creating alternatives to social promotion and retention as traditionally practiced. The value of retaining students has been debated among educators, politicians, and parents. The large majority of research shows that retention is ineffective and even damaging, yet many stakeholders continue to believe that retention is beneficial. Schools must begin to think about student failure and success in new ways. Some suggestions are offered for school systems that are looking for alternatives to traditional promotion practices, and the experiences of two school systems in the process of change are described. (Contains 30 references.) (SLD)

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WHEN STUDENTS DON'T SUCCEED:

Shedding Light on Grade Retention

JULY 1999

NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

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Shedding Light on Grade Retention

JENNIFER FAGER
&
RAE RICHEN

JULY 1999

NORTHWEST REGIONAL
EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

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FOREWORD

This booklet is the twelfth in a series of "hot topic" reports produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. These reports briefly address current educational concerns and issues as indicated by requests for information that come to the Laboratory from the Northwest region and beyond. Each booklet contains a discussion of research and literature pertinent to the issue, a sampling of how Northwest schools are addressing the issue, suggestions for adapting these ideas to schools, selected references, and contact information.

One objective of the series is to foster a sense of community and connection among educators. Another is to increase awareness of current education-related themes and concerns. Each booklet gives practitioners a glimpse of how fellow educators are addressing issues, overcoming obstacles, and attaining success in certain areas. The goal of the series is to give educators current, reliable, and useful information on topics that are important to them.

Other titles in the series include:

- *Service Learning in the Northwest Region*
- *Tutoring: Strategies for Successful Learning*
- *Scheduling Alternatives: Options for Student Success*
- *Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?*
- *Alternative Schools: Approaches for Students at Risk*
- *All Students Learning: Making It Happen in Your School*
- *High-Quality Professional Development: An Essential Component of Successful Schools*
- *Student Mentoring*
- *Peaceful Schools*
- *After-School Programs: Good for Kids, Good for Communities*
- *Parent Partners: Using Parents to Enhance Education*

INTRODUCTION

Retain or promote. Flunk or pass. Repeat or advance. All are phrases that represent a hotly debated issue in education. The issue is in-grade retention and the stakes are high—for both the policy makers, who often champion its ability to whip low-performing schools and students into shape, and for the kids themselves, whose lives can be forever changed by promotion policies and legislation. In-grade retention has been extensively researched and practiced, yet the research and practice often diverge, and no one can say exactly why.

What should schools do with struggling students? Determining what to do when a child is not succeeding in school is a difficult task. Such decisions often weigh heavily on teachers, principals, and parents. Many times, the decision boils down to retaining students for a second try at a particular grade level. The goal of this booklet is not to determine what is the one right way to handle students who are not meeting standards. Instead, we hope to: 1) raise awareness among educators about the practices of retention and social promotion, and 2) share with them alternatives to what has traditionally been an "either/or" decision. Because of the political nature of this issue, we know that it may be difficult to address in many school systems. This booklet is intended to provide an overview of this issue, and to be used as both a resource tool and a starting point for discussion. Far too many factors contribute to decisions about promotion and retention to allow one document or publication to provide a definitive answer. Such life-changing decisions require everyone involved to have the long-term interest of every child at heart.

This booklet reviews the research and conventional wisdom concerning retention and promotion, and includes an exploration of alternative practices that can be used to prevent failure and improve

a student's chances for successful remediation. The booklet also describes how two Northwest school systems are creating alternatives to social promotion and retention as traditionally practiced.

Definitions

Grade Retention: Holding a child back to repeat a particular grade level for a second year

Social Promotion: The practice of promoting students to the next grade level even when minimum competencies have not been met

The Debate

The value of retaining low-achieving students is hotly debated among educators, politicians, and parents. Advocates of retention logically point out that promoting a child regardless of achievement puts an unprepared child out into the world. They maintain that holding a child back in the early grades can boost readiness and self-esteem by improving the child's basic skill foundation. In later grades, some hold that retention can be a consequence for low achievement, forcing students to be accountable for their academic work.

Retention has traditionally been used as a remedy for student failure, and without other targeted intervention or remediation it often places retained children in an environment almost identical to the one they didn't succeed in during the previous year. Opponents of retention point to years of research that shows retention does not help children academically or socially. Moreover, say critics, research shows a strong correlation between retention and long-term negative academic and social experiences for students.

Adding to this confusion is the current national attention on high standards and accountability, and the swinging pendulum of public opinion. In such a climate it is difficult to design policies that clearly guide teachers through these critical decisions that can heavily impact children's lives.

Historical Relevance

Retention of students for academic failure has been a common practice in American schools since the beginning of public education. In the early 1900s approximately 20 percent of the students in U.S. public schools failed and were retained each year. During this long era, a high drop-out rate was expected (Doyle, 1989).

In the 1930s, as interest in child psychology became a focus for educators, retention was used more sparingly, making social promotion a common feature. Failure or retention was linked to negative social and psychological effects, and the policy of social promotion gained momentum. By the 1980s a backlash against social promotion appeared. This backlash was crystallized in A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, a 1983 report by President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education that brought increased attention to the school reform movement. In a 1986 Gallup Poll, 72 percent of U.S. citizens favored stricter grade-to-grade promotion standards (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990). On a national level, in-grade retentions grew dramatically during the early 1990s (Sherwood, 1993). During the last 15 years, 19 states have established specific standards for grade promotion and graduation requirements. Community pressure to maintain high standards has also created strong support for retention policies.

The Current Situation

It is difficult to find a person—teacher, principal, or citizen—who will disagree that academic standards should be high for all students. A 1995 poll by the public opinion research group Public Agenda showed this to be the case. It found that 90 percent of the public favored higher standards in core subjects and 68 percent favored requiring students to pass standardized national exams as conditions for moving from one grade to the next. Promotion standards are a logical, and perhaps inevitable, link to the increasing public attention on high academic standards. Several states have begun official efforts to end social promotion and require strict achievement-related promotion policies.

A 1997 survey by the American Federation of Teachers indicated that the practice of social promotion is rampant (Harrington-Lueker, 1998). Another national survey of teachers (this time of first- and fifth-grade teachers), found that 58.8 percent believed that retention prepares a student for successful achievement in the following grade, gives an underachieving student a chance to catch up academically, and is an effective means of mastery of grade-level requirements (Tanner & Combs, 1993). The findings of these surveys were reinforced by Shepard and Smith's (1990) synthesis of research on retention, which estimates that about 2.6 million U.S. children are retained in grade each year at an average cost of $6,500 per student per year. When totaled, this estimate puts the cost of retention at more than $15 billion per school year. Some researchers believe that the call for higher academic standards and the pressure for accountability have pushed the number of retentions up by 20 percent per year since Shepard and Smith's estimate (Sherwood, 1993).

Retention receives plenty of government attention as well. In a memorandum dated February 1998, President Clinton urged the Secretary of Education to work toward eliminating the policy of social promotion in the schools. U.S. newspapers and other media widely reported his stance, equating the reduction of social promotions with "raising academic standards" in the nation's schools. However, frequently overlooked paragraphs of that White House memorandum stated that the alternative to social promotion should not be the repetition of the same curriculum with the same presentation. The Secretary of Education was urged to help school districts find alternatives by using effective prevention methods and remedial programs.

"Neither promoting students when they are unprepared, nor simply retaining them in the same grade is the right response to low student achievement. Both approaches presume high rates of initial failure are inevitable and acceptable. Schools must implement those proven practices that will prepare students to meet rigorous standards the first time" (White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 1998).

Certain education experts note retention practices can be based on flawed logic. Says Linda Darling-Hammond, Executive Director of the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching, "The premise of grade retention as a solution for poor performance is that the problem, if there is one, resides in the child rather than in the schooling he or she has encountered."

Until recently, the public belief in the effectiveness of retention created a powerful mandate to retain low-achieving students for their own good as well as for society's good (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Countering this mandate, however, are the last two and a half decades of research that clearly indicate traditionally used retention is ineffective and can adversely affect students.

What About the Research?

Retention was once believed to help students gain academic ground, improve maturity, and build a stronger skill base. Now it is often considered more poison than cure, and researchers point to the growing body of research supporting that view. Ironically, this research has been carried out and its results disseminated during the same years that the country has moved toward requiring higher promotion standards in the public schools. In this politicized and conflicted atmosphere, it is difficult for school districts to develop policies based on the known effects of retention. In one review, the findings of several large studies are summed up: "Neither social promotion nor retention per se are effective at solving the problem of providing appropriate instruction for low-performing students" (Karweit, 1991).

The large majority of research shows that retention is ineffective, even damaging, yet many stakeholders continue to believe that retention is beneficial. In explaining the continued use of retention in spite of contradictory evidence, Shepard and Smith (1990) state, "Retention appears effective because the majority of retained children make some progress the second year. Even though comparative studies show that the retained child would have made just as much or more progress without retention, teacher beliefs are based on perceived gains and do not have the benefit of this latter comparison." Other reasons for continued use include the fact that recent research is often not readily available to busy, practicing teachers, as well as the reality that in many systems teachers aren't offered other alternatives for intervention or remediation. Even when the research findings are known, the information can be lost in a sea of prevailing appeals to maintain high academic standards.

It should also be noted that a limited body of research finds positive outcomes for specific programs that include grade retention. For example, one recent study asserted retention could halt failure that had begun in earlier years (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994). And, in an earlier review of studies that also reported positive outcomes for programs with a grade-retention component, Holmes noted distinct parallels in the way the schools handled the issue of grade retention. These programs included early identification and targeted assistance for retained students, as well as personalized education plans and classes with low student-to-teacher ratios (Holmes, 1986). Traditional grade retention without the supportive components noted above may be politically and economically attractive, but is not supported by research.

The following overview of current research and literature summarizes important findings. When interpreting the research, it is important to note that most research studies on the effects of grade retention focus on children retained in the early years of their education. Limited research exists that addresses the effects of grade retention in older children, grades five and up. One reason for this may be that as students become older, they assume more responsibility for their education and subsequent success. Therefore, discussions about the efficacy of retention shift somewhat as students begin to play a more active role in educational decisions.

General Findings

- One large study following students in the Chicago Public Schools showed that children did not improve over time, especially if they were retained in first grade (Reynolds, Temple, & McCoy, 1997).
- Gains made during the repeated year fade over time (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1992; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], n.d.).
- The more times a student is retained, the stronger the chances are of that child eventually dropping out of school altogether (Harrington-Lueker, 1998; NASP, n.d.).
- Traditionally, retention is more likely to have been used for boys, minorities, low-income children, and children rated low in social adjustment (Reynolds et al., 1997).

Academic Realities

- Retention does not increase learning readiness for most pupils (Norton, 1990).
- Retention does not effectively increase academic achievement among low-achieving students. In fact, pupils who are promoted rather than retained tend to learn more the next year than pupils of like ability who are not promoted (Norton, 1990; Walters & Borgers, 1995).
- Retention is sometimes used before diagnostic testing that can point schools toward specific remedial help for specific learning problems. In a study of 344 Michigan students referred for special education evaluation, 201 were determined to possess a learning disability. Of these 201, 71.6 percent had been retained at least once before they were referred for evaluation (Barnett, 1996).

Social Implications

- Retention can promote discipline problems and has a negative effect on the student's self-concept (Norton, 1990; Robertson, 1997).
- Retention does not necessarily improve socialization; nonpromoted students tend to choose companions from grades higher than their own (Norton, 1990).
- In a study of retained kindergartners, some children did show social gains during and shortly after retention, but they only slightly increased competence for task orientation. The authors of the study add, "There was little evidence that social competencies were enhanced by retention itself." They went on to point out that retention is traditionally a "passive" intervention—it does not carry with it any focused deliberate effort to induce change in target behavior (Pianta, Tietbohl, & Bennett, 1997).

The above lists of findings should not be misconstrued as an argument for social promotion. Rather, they are intended to reinforce the fact that promotion policies must work to ensure that research-based, equitable practices are in place which allow students to acquire the skills they need to graduate and succeed in life beyond school. Simply put, schools must begin to think about student failure and success in new ways. As practices in and of themselves, neither retention nor social promotion are adequate responses to low student achievement.

What's a School to Do?

Once a school system, with the support of the school board, has determined it will seek alternatives to traditional promotion practices, it is a good idea for teachers and principals to visit other districts where successful efforts are in place. Teachers should be heavily involved in planning and strategizing ways to improve their own skills for dealing with failing students. Parents and the community should be informed of developments throughout the design and implementation of any plan. In addition, considerable time should be spent designing basic school policies for curriculum and student assessment, as well as creating an appropriate report card. General suggestions for facilitating changes are detailed in the following steps:

1. Assess current practices of retention and social promotion to determine what has worked and what hasn't. Data such as grades, test scores, behavioral referrals, and dropout information can help to inform and guide decisions.
2. Familiarize staff with literature and research on the topic of student promotion.
3. Visit other schools that have successfully implemented programs to combat social promotion and retention.
4. Involve teachers in all phases of planning and implementation (their support of all efforts is critical).
5. Investigate state policies and any legislation that could hinder or support implementation of alternatives.
6. Communicate with parents and the broader community. As previously stated, this issue can be very volatile, so open communication with all stakeholders is a must.

7. Examine alternatives and design a policy that is clear, straightforward, and flexible enough to meet the needs of all students. (Refer to pages 15-19 for more information on alternatives and policy design.)
8. Invest in appropriate professional development for teachers. Some researchers assert that teacher expertise is the single most important determinant of student performance. They point out that as much as 40 percent of the difference in overall student performance can be accounted for by teacher expertise (Darling-Hammond, 1998).
9. Use diagnostic testing with all students to provide you with a clear picture of students' abilities, particularly in reading since it is key to all other academic success (Kelly, 1999). Use this information to guide remediation efforts.
10. Augment assessment strategies to include methods beyond traditional standardized tests.
11. Proceed slowly with all changes and ensure that there is continuity of practice from teacher to teacher and grade to grade—effective, lasting change takes consistency and time.
12. Monitor implementation and be prepared to adjust efforts if what you're doing isn't working.

What Are the Alternatives?

It is encouraging to note that there are many alternatives to traditional practices of grade retention and promotion. None are as cut-and-dried as saying to a student "you pass" or "you fail." Instead, these alternatives require the ongoing commitment of educators, parents, and students. Though none can guarantee success, they can work to provide students with the extra assistance that might make the difference. Special emphasis should be given to early intervention; catching problems when they first appear in a child's school career can negate many other issues that could otherwise emerge in later grades. Ideally, schools should provide several levels and types of interventions to students throughout the year (not just at the end, when failure seems imminent). Suggested alternatives include:

- **Use assessments that measure student success in different ways.** Students must be given the opportunity to demonstrate their success in a variety of ways. Standardized tests cannot be the only measure of achievement. Portfolio and performance assessments are examples of other types of assessment that can provide educators with a more accurate picture of student learning. In addition, there should be continuity of assessment methods from grade to grade, and from teacher to teacher.
- **Encourage parent involvement.** The positive effect parent involvement has upon student achievement can not be disputed. Parent involvement can make a critical difference for a borderline student. There are many ways parents can be involved with their child's education, and it is important that schools help them discover what type of involvement might best benefit their child (Epstein, 1996; Jimerson et al., 1997).

- **Vary instructional approaches.** Offering children different ways of learning is critical in addressing unique learning styles and needs. Individualized instruction, mixed-age classes, creative grouping, reduced class size, scheduling modifications, and the use of volunteer aides are just a few strategies that can provide instructional variety (Robertson, 1997).
- **Provide students at risk of failing with one-on-one guidance.** An advisor/advisee relationship between a student and a counselor, teacher, or other mentor can offer the individualized attention many students desperately need to succeed (Robertson, 1997). Together they can design a personal education plan that will help the student set learning goals, break tasks down into manageable chunks, and make him or her accountable for academic achievement.
- **Institute a learning resource program.** A learning resource program is a specialized outreach designed to assist students at risk of failing. It can be a single course, a self-contained classroom, or an alternative school. Such programs are unique and should be tailored to the specific needs of a school and the students it serves. Students can be identified for the program in a number of ways: referral by staff, self, or parents; excessive absenteeism; lagging academic performance; or behavioral difficulties. The goal of such a program is to offer these students targeted academic remediation, study-skills strategies, and interpersonal communication ideas that increase their chances of academic success (McDonald & Bean, 1991).

- **Use tutoring or mentoring.** Tutoring and mentoring are strategies that can be incredibly powerful tools for student remediation. Tutoring generally has an academic focus, while mentoring is about positive role modeling (though it can include academics as a component). Both are very flexible in structure and can involve students working with other students, teachers working with students, or adult volunteers working with students. Regardless of the arrangement, the resulting situation is often beneficial for both parties. Both tutoring and mentoring are relatively inexpensive strategies that can be used in any school and with students of different ages.
- **Offer students alternative or additional education choices.** There will always be some students who do not succeed in traditional school environments in the typical amount of time allotted. School systems can provide students with options such as satellite-learning programs that target specialized learning needs, career-focused academies, after-school learning laboratories, or summer school institutes. Give students opportunities for different types of projects and hands-on learning experiences (Devries & Cohn, 1998).

Clear Policies Encourage Positive Strategies

Depending on the unique needs of school communities, a written policy can assist school systems in clearly outlining their position on student promotion and related issues. Based on case studies of district policies, the Commission on Student Learning (CSL) offers the following guidelines for developing a local policy for promotion and retention (CSL, 1996):

- **Establish a clear philosophy or goal that promotes success.** Many policies imply that the school's goal is to make correct educational decisions for the students, however, an explicitly stated philosophy or goal provides a clear criterion against which details of the policy and individual decisions can be measured.
- **Emphasize instruction over retention.** Policies should state the specific learning improvement plan that is to be followed. This may include procedures for assisting students and checking progress more than once a year, so that students have a chance to catch up with their peers.
- **Use valid measures of achievement.** The CSL found that most legal challenges to policies occur when policies are based on standardized tests whose reliability and validity have been contested. Courts have been consistent in their view that teacher-assigned grades are within a teacher's area of educational expertise. Past court action makes it clear that school officials must make certain that achievement criteria reliably reflect what students are taught as well as what they have learned.
- **State the promotion/retention criteria clearly [if applicable].** State how decisions will be made, and who will be involved in the process in cases where some of the criteria are not met.

- **Develop flexible promotion/retention standards and leave room for appeal.** At a minimum, this means not relying on a single test score. Many factors contribute to a student's potential for success.
- **Include more than minimum competency requirements.** Minimum competency can sometimes lead to a pass/fail mentality. Policies are more beneficial when they are oriented toward high achievement for all students.
- **Be clear about how you will make accommodations for special-needs students.** All policies should work to ensure practices are equitable regardless of student background or ability.

Conclusion

As schools plan for alternatives to retention and social promotion, there are exciting possibilities ahead. By keeping abreast of the research on remedial and preventive programs, educators can offer students a variety of tested ideas that can build academic and social skills. Additionally, as schools collect and disseminate statistics on the usefulness of various alternatives, more effective help can be offered to students nationwide. Over time, schools will be able to employ a variety of methods for preventing failure and offering targeted help before students become discouraged.

There is no simple answer that meets the needs of each student. However, by modeling a willing effort to help all children reach their greatest potential, we also model our belief that all children can succeed at learning and at life.

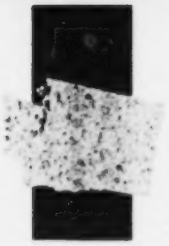
In an effort to lend clarity to the retention/promotion debate, we leave readers with the following recommendations:

- Grade retention should be used sparingly and not until other intervention efforts have proved ineffective.
- If used, grade retention should not be a repetition of the same curriculum with the same instructional delivery.
- Measures of intervention should be implemented as soon as a child is identified as being at risk of failure.
- Parents must be involved in intervention efforts, retention decisions, and any subsequent remediation.

- School staff should be made familiar with literature and research on grade retention to facilitate informed decision making.
- Schools should make retention decisions based on multiple forms of data and analysis. In addition, students' developmental level and self-concept should contribute to potential decisions.

THE NORTHWEST SAMPLER

The following pages contain descriptions of two school systems that were determined to change the way they dealt with failing students. Both have received national recognition for their efforts. The first site chose to make its changes within the traditional educational setting; the second changed its concept of school and the way students learn. These Northwest programs represent some of the promising strategies being implemented in schools around the nation. Included for each location is contact information, a description of the program, student perspectives, observed outcomes as a result of the program, and tips directly from these educators to others looking to implement similar efforts.



Location

Kennewick School District
200 S. Dayton Street
Kennewick, WA 99336

Contact

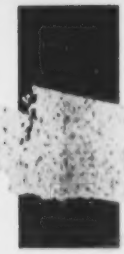
Sue Denslow, Principal of Horse Heaven Hills Middle School
Phone 509/585-3260
Fax: 509/585-3269

Description

Among educators, there is growing concern that students in the middle grades are having an increasingly difficult time fully engaging in school. Teachers and principals often concur that the cause is a pervasive student attitude of apathy that subsequently leads to a feeling that middle school is irrelevant. Many students communicate that middle school doesn't really "count," and that they can coast until high school. Unfortunately, social and academic skills not learned in middle school can have profound effects in later years. Knowing all of this to be a reality in their district, educators in the Kennewick School District began making substantial changes in their requirements of students, parents, teachers, and administrators five years ago. At that time, middle school teachers were troubled about promoting students who suffered no consequences for failing to do their work. And high school teachers were asking why so many students were failing high school classes or dropping out. Because of these and many other related concerns, the district, with full support from the school board and school administrators, adopted its Student Accountability Policy in 1995. It was implemented in the 1995-96 school year.

The goal of the policy is to ensure that students have acquired the skills and work habits necessary to be successful at the next grade level. It makes students aware of the learning goals they must meet and requires them to meet these goals. The policy is straightforward, but the implementation can be complex depending on the needs of individual students. It focuses on targeted intervention, personalized for every student. If intervention is unsuccessful, however, and minimum standards are not met, students can be retained. For more than 3,000 students this means they have to earn promotion to the next grade—it is no longer guaranteed.

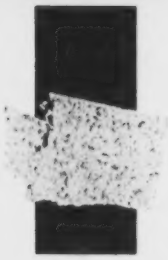
To make this policy a reality, district staff developed a rigorous set of promotion standards. Middle school students (fifth through eighth grades) must pass all classes, maintain good attendance and behavior, and meet the standards on the district's functional-level tests in reading and math (these are criterion-referenced tests). The goal of this policy is intervention, not retention, even though that is what grabs the attention of students. The district has developed several levels of intervention that are implemented throughout the school year. The process for implementing the policy is not necessarily the same at each school, but it generally starts with a review of the first mid-quarter progress reports. Students who are failing are identified and their progress is tracked. If they had difficulties during the previous year, they may be put on an intervention plan immediately. Other students are not given formal improvement contracts until they actually receive a failing mark. The district has learned that it must be as proactive as possible and start interventions early. Interventions may include weekly progress reports to parents, daily progress reports, extra help during lunchtime, after-school tutorials, peer tutors, and so forth. Any student who receives an F is assigned to a teacher who becomes their case manager. Together the case manager, student, and parents develop a personal education plan.



Most students identified as being at risk of retention are also enrolled in a special course called Personal and Social Responsibility (PSR). They take PSR in place of an elective. This semester-long class, based on a curriculum developed by education researcher, Constance Dembrowsky, works to help students improve their self-esteem, their ability to relate effectively to others, their willingness to take responsibility for their behaviors and actions, and their problem-solving and goal-setting skills. The course emphasizes the importance of the choices students make and how they can affect the world around them. Teachers who instruct in PSR courses are specially trained and receive regular training to further their skills and knowledge of the program.

In May of each year, all schools convene a building-level committee to review the promotion status of students. Each student is rated according to established criteria that takes into account attendance, classroom performance, and functional-level test scores. Students who display excessive deficits are recommended for retention. Decisions about special education students are made by the building's multidisciplinary team. The building principal makes the final determination to retain or promote. Students who are recommended for retention can reverse the decision by attending (at their own expense) and passing summer school. If they do not pass summer school, or choose not to attend, they are not promoted to the next grade. Parents can also appeal retention decisions to the school board, but not many do. In the 1997-98 school year, 50 percent of students recommended for retention elected to attend summer school.

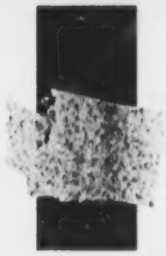
Summer school is designed to reinforce essential skills for school success such as decision making, goal setting, time management, study skills, conflict resolution, and self-discipline. In addition, specific remediation work (in reading, math, or writing) is tailored for each student according to their needs. Summer school curricu-



lum includes PSR, reading, writing, and math. Teachers are specifically trained to teach PSR and deal with at-risk youth. Students must demonstrate 80 percent proficiency on classwork and homework and behave appropriately. Those who miss more than two out of the 20 summer school days do not pass it. The summer school program is very successful for the students who choose to attend. Classes are relatively small (20-25 students), and each teacher has a paraeducator in the classroom. During the summer of 1998, 93 percent of students who enrolled in summer school were successful.

In preparation for implementation of the Student Accountability Policy, much work was done to inform parents and the school community of the coming changes. The school board informed parents and the community of the new policy a year before it went into effect. During the summer before implementation, and several times during the 1995-96 school year, the district sent letters to parents of students who had received failing grades, notifying them that standards were in place and that their children needed to improve academically or risk being retained the next school year.

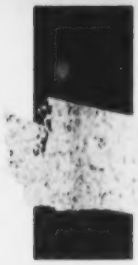
During that first year of implementation, structured interventions reduced the number of failing students by more than 50 percent. Of the 450 middle school students who received failing grades, 233 met the standards by the end of the 1995-96 school year, thanks to the commitment of the middle school teachers who worked hard to prepare students for the next grade. The 106 students who either did not attend or did not pass summer school were not promoted. By the 1997-98 school year, over 95 percent of students from grades six through eight were promoted to the next grade. The policy for fifth grade was implemented this year (1998-99) so data are not yet available. Initial years of implementation saw many retained students leaving the Kennewick School District to avoid retention. Because many school systems throughout the state of Washington have adopted similar policies, this practice has diminished considerably.



With any new effort that requires a significant change in the way schools operate, there is always concern about increasing teachers' workloads. Teachers in Kennewick have reacted quite favorably to the Student Accountability Policy. First, it validates their efforts and the importance of their curricula by demanding that students pass their classes. Second, the policy puts very few additional time requirements on teachers' already burdened schedules—they are expected to meet with students and parents, and to try different interventions to help students succeed anyway. Students and parents know the policy and respect it. During the years of implementation there have been only two retention appeals to the school board. And for those students who, despite all intervention efforts, are unable to meet standards in Kennewick, alternative placement is sought.

Student Perspective

In talking with students in the Kennewick School District, one thing becomes readily apparent: the Student Accountability Policy has made a difference, particularly for students who at one time were marginal and not succeeding. The students don't speak about fear of retention and its consequences, as one might guess, but instead they praise the policy and seem to recognize the great lengths their school has gone to to facilitate their success. Though it is difficult for some students to pinpoint exactly what turned their school performance around, these one-time failing students do believe that a negative attitude prevented them from successfully engaging in school. The students are also quick to acknowledge the power that individual teachers have had in helping them recognize the detrimental effects of their attitudes. Perhaps it can be communicated best using the words of one student who said, "It just feels good to get good grades and know you've turned in your work."

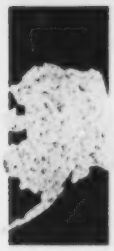


Observed Outcomes

- Student performance and seriousness about schoolwork has increased. The expectations for students, parents, and teachers are clear.
- Students are more in charge of their own learning goals; they are better at focusing on long-range goals. They accept that the choices they make determine what happens to them, and they are making better choices.
- There is strong community support for measurable high standards.

Keys to Success

- From the beginning, involve teachers in creating the policy and procedures. They need to own it. A policy written by the school board or central administration will not be as effective.
- Keep the policy and its implementation as simple as possible.
- Implement the policy consistently and uniformly.
- Focus on the goal of student success. Clearly communicate that the intention is support, not punishment.
- Tailor interventions to match student needs. One remedy will not work for all problems—more interventions will equal greater chances of success.
- For students who are retained, the second year has to be different from the previous one. Design support and interventions to ensure that the student will not repeat the same mistakes and experience the same failures.
- Don't give up!



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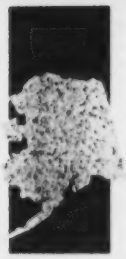
Description

Looking beyond traditional methods of promoting and retaining students, five years ago the Chugach School District reshaped its vision for education. It began with the arrival of Superintendent Roger Sampson, who brought with him Assistant Superintendent Richard DeLorenzo. (Sampson retired at the end of the 1998-99 school year; DeLorenzo will assume leadership in 1999-00.) The school board leveled with Sampson and DeLorenzo during one of their first meetings. "There is something wrong [with our schools] and we don't know how to fix it," they said. "We want it fixed." They pointed to troubling statistics like a high dropout rate, frequent teacher and administrator turnover, dismal standardized test scores, and low success rates of Chugach graduates (only one student had graduated from a four-year college in the previous 20 years, and few attempted any formal vocational training).

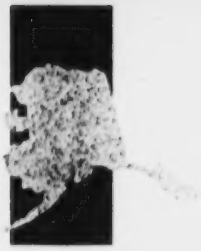
The school board was correct: there was something wrong, and it needed to be fixed. Three questions would guide and shape the reform work the district set in motion: 1) Are kids developing necessary academic and social skills? 2) What happens to students when they graduate? and 3) What do we need to change to make our schools successful in the 21st century?



Sampson and DeLorenzo began their task by studying models of school and community improvement that could be adapted to their district. They decided that Onward To Excellence (OTE), a model developed by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, was best suited for what they hoped to accomplish. Specifically, they liked that OTE was an ongoing process and not a one-shot event. They also were attracted to the grass-roots method of improvement that OTE encouraged. They wanted to involve communities in the improvement of their schools.

And so began the process of community building that saw school leaders and teachers going out into their communities to talk, resolve, and find common ground. The three villages (Tatitlek, Chenega Bay, and Whittier) served by the Anchorage-based district are extremely small (ranging in size from 65 to 350 residents) and inaccessible by automobile, making them all very unique in culture. One must fly into the Native Alaskan villages of Tatitlek and Chenega Bay, or take a train through mountain tunnels to reach Whittier. Such size and isolation presented an array of challenges that had over time, fostered some very unhealthy communities and schools. This was evident in the animosity many community members felt toward school staff, and often in animosity between students and staff.

Chugach's new Assistant Superintendent, Bob Crumley (who was principal of Whittier Community School from 1995-1999) recalls his first year at Whittier as one of strife and conflict. Teachers would confide in him their fear of students who harassed them off school grounds; and the school itself was often the site of unrest, with open rebellion and disrespect common occurrences. With discord so pervasive in the school and community, it is difficult to imagine how school improvement led by OTE's town meetings could take place successfully. Indeed, some residents warned Crumley that such meetings would be volatile and unfruitful. Undaunted, and

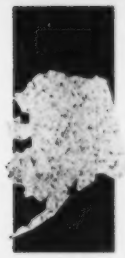


with the full support of district leadership, the meetings proceeded in Whittier as they did in the other Chugach communities. Strategies learned in OTE training, such as team building and small-group discussion/reporting, along with skillful leaders who possessed the ability to keep discussions focused, fostered valuable dialogue. Townspeople spoke about what good schools look like, traits of successful people, and what they valued about their own school experiences. What were predicted to be free-for-alls became gatherings where all opinions were respected, and soon some shared beliefs about learning emerged.

Coinciding with the OTE process were efforts to improve the nuts and bolts of learning. The district knew that having communities on board for improvement was only one piece of the puzzle. They also needed to revamp teaching and learning. But in an era of high standards and low tolerance for failure, Chugach educators recognized that true improvement would be a monumental task. They knew that real improvement meant addressing the whole student, not just a focus on academic success.

The solution they found didn't come as part of any slickly marketed curriculum. Instead, they assessed what was working in the district; they contemplated the trends that were shaping education at both state and national levels; and they considered the unique needs of their students and communities. These considerations left them with several conclusions, including the importance of high standards for all students, the concepts of individualized and thematic learning as powerful instructional methods, and the importance of life-skills training as a key to success in the world beyond school.

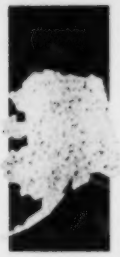
The system that resulted is a student-driven, standards-based curriculum. Textbooks no longer dictate instruction—students do. Dubbed "the Chugach Model," the system was fully implemented



in the 1997-98 school year. At the core of the effort are 10 standard areas based on academic and character development. All students must progress through specified levels of development in each standard area. These standard areas, which are the driving force behind instruction, are as follows:

1. Mathematics
2. Technology
3. Reading
4. Social Sciences
5. Service Learning
6. Writing
7. Personal/social/health development
8. Career development
9. Cultural awareness and expression
10. Science

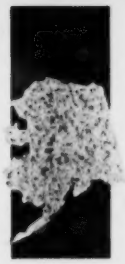
The goal of the Chugach Model is for students to be able to apply skills in new and unpredictable situations long after they leave the school system. Three types of assessments ensure that students meet requirements. Teachers measure student achievement with skills-based assessments (which ask students to demonstrate proficiency in foundational skills), analytical assessments (which ask students to apply what they have learned), and contextual assessments (which require students to put what they've learned in school into practice in the real world). Instruction is individualized and self-paced. All students must meet the same standards, but how they meet the standards or how long it takes isn't as important as truly meeting them. The performance standards are set in a manner which ensures that once met, learning expectations are exceeded at the district and state levels. The district has found that when given clear expectations, a defined route for achievement, and the responsibility for learning, all students are capable of meeting high standards.



Traditional report cards have been replaced with a developmental report card that takes parents, students, and teachers through the expected competency levels step by step. All classes are multiage groupings that allow children to work at their own pace Graduation diplomas became competency-based, and are awarded to students when they reach specified levels in all standard areas. All students have an evolving Individual Learning Plan (ILP) that is designed expressly for them. Students have a copy of their ILP so they can easily reference it and track their own progress. If a deficiency is noted in any standard area, the plan will target remediation for that area and involve all necessary staff.

To accommodate this new system of individualized learning, all students have a developmental profile that follows them from year to year. The profile is a running record of where every student is developmentally in each of the 10 standard areas. It recognizes that students are strong in some areas and weak in others, and doesn't penalize them for learning at different rates, as traditional systems inadvertently do much of the time.

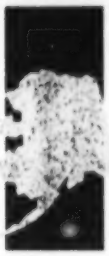
Students know this system and understand what it means for them. To reinforce student understanding, the district placed posters around its schools that clearly detail standards, benchmarks, and scoring guides. Student-led conferences are also a regular part of every school in the district. These conferences ensure that all players are on the same page. In addition, students have access to their own Student Assessment Binder, which is a notebook that logs each assessment used as they pass from one standard level to the next. There is no guesswork involved. Everyone—students, parents, and teachers—knows what is expected of them.



With the Chugach Model, it is possible that a 13-year-old student can receive a diploma, or that a 17-year-old student is far from graduating, but generally the district tries to keep students with their same-age peers. This is not to say that classrooms don't vary (in fact, most rooms have an age span of about four years among students. Regardless of their physical placement, the district makes every effort to instruct each student based on individual needs. Every student receives an education that is relevant, has meaningful assessments, and offers effective remediation.

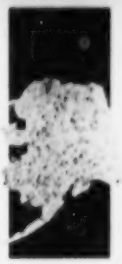
The third piece of reform Chugach leaders put in place was life-skills training. While community support and involvement was critical, and individualized, high-quality instruction equally valuable, providing students with the skills for a successful transition to life after graduation was absolutely necessary. Whether they want to pursue higher education, military service, or a specific trade, students need life skills that enable them to become contributing members of society.

The district took several innovative steps in developing its life-skills component. First, a meeting was arranged with business leaders from around the state of Alaska. About 22 CEOs and managers gathered to discuss what traits they were looking for in employees. They pondered the good things schools were doing for kids and also made suggestions for what could be done better. Their suggestions, coupled with those from the communities, jelled to form what became the district's career development and personal/social/health standards. Consequently, application in all curriculum areas is essential—students must understand how what they learn in school transfers to the real world and then know how to demonstrate this understanding.



Taking this concept a step further than most school systems, Chugach implemented a "house school" idea called Anchorage House. Beginning in the middle grades, students travel to Anchorage and spend time in one of two neighborhood houses owned by the district. Time spent at the houses is intended to instill in students an awareness of life and of responsibilities beyond home and school. Initial stays at Anchorage House last only a few days. These build throughout high school and culminate in a stay of a month or longer during which students live almost independently. While there, groups of eight to 10 students work as a team on trust building, open communication, social skills, time management, job exploration and responsibility, and household tasks. Most Chugach students will have five Anchorage House experiences by the time they graduate. Spending time in one of the houses, staffed by specially trained and certified teachers, is a privilege that all students eagerly anticipate.

Staff development is another vital component to the effectiveness of Chugach's efforts. Not only is content taught differently in the district, but it is assessed in ways that are new to most teachers. Success in Chugach would be impossible without highly skilled teachers to implement the model on a daily basis. Though the state specifies that a maximum of 10 staff development days can replace instructional time with students, Chugach uses summers and weekends to increase staff development days to 30 or more. All in service days are focused on enhancing teachers' abilities to instruct within the model. Teacher needs drive professional development, which can be provided by district experts but often comes from outside consultants. In addition to bolstering instructional skills, inservices focus on team building and camaraderie. All teachers also have a district-developed teacher resource binder that contains information about the district's mission statement, goals, beliefs, and assessment techniques, as well as sample assessments and a background on education theory.



To implement the Chugach Model, the district received a waiver from the state education department that gave it flexibility with certain regulatory compliances. Specifically, there are no letter grades or credit hours awarded in Chugach. The district has not received special state funding to implement any of the changes, but it has on occasion received other privately pursued grants.

Student Perspective

In many ways, students in the Chugach School District are like kids everywhere. They listen to the same music, adhere to the same styles, and have values and dreams similar to those of students around the nation. Yet these students' lives are very different from typical American children. Chugach students attend tiny schools in isolated communities in a forbidding climate that prevents the sun from shining for months at a time. In many ways their communities are wrought with domestic strife, and most students can easily be labeled "at-risk" in a number of ways. Yet while their lives diverge from what is considered "typical," these kids are inspired. This is evident in the way they welcome visitors and eagerly talk about their school work. It is evident in the way they talk to each other and interact with their teachers. And it is evident in the pride that permeates the schools.

In talking with students from Chugach, several things become apparent. First, they recognize the work of their teachers and are grateful for small classes and schools that care. They also feel in control of their own learning—they know what they know and what they still need to learn. The students of Chugach have an unspoken confidence in themselves, from those who have always succeeded to those who have always struggled. Finally, they are secure in their goals for the future. Whether these goals take them to higher education in distant places or keep them in their village, these kids exude a quality that speaks to the power of an education tailor made for each one of them.

Observed Outcomes

- In the 1994-95 school year average standardized test scores for the district were at the 30th percentile; in 1999 average test scores were at the 72nd percentile.
- In the 1994-95 school year the district experienced a 50 percent staff turnover (which was typical for any given year in the district); five years later in 1999 it was 10 percent.
- Parents now understand their role in their children's education, and they recognize how important their involvement is.

Keys to Success

- Recognize the importance of cohesion among all stakeholders; no one—students, teachers, administrators, the school board, or the community—should operate in isolation.
- Work to get 100 percent staff buy-in, and then honor that by involving everyone in the improvement process.
- Frequently celebrate successes.
- Put in writing the responsibilities of all stakeholders to reinforce the power that everyone has in the change process.
- Administrators should be willing to accept responsibility for what goes wrong, and should pass commendations on to staff, students, and the community.

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